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ABSTRACT

Because the changing demographics of the U.S. work force are making cultural diversity the rule rather than the exception, the skills necessary for people to work in a multicultural environment are becoming a natural employment requirement. Those skills are integral to the tool that is called cross-cultural/intercultural/multicultural communication. The central principle of cross-cultural communication theory is that everything one does and everything one perceives is filtered through one's cultural knowledge. Misunderstandings, hurt feelings, and general ill will usually result when one culture's knowledge is used as the base for interacting with staff, employees, clients, or customers from other, different cultures. Cross-cultural communication provides a way to know what to expect and how to interact when one lives or works with people from other cultures. Cross-cultural communication is essential in the workplace because the new job seekers will come from many cultures and the future will be a job seekers' market. Potential employees will want to work where they feel the most comfortable and the most valued. Cross-cultural training requires a strong long-term commitment on the part of employers, whether they employ in-house trainers or consultants. (CML)

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CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN THE WORKPLACE: CAN WE STAY HOME WITHOUT IT?

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Presented at the 1989 National Alliance of Business Conference in Washington, DC on October 3, 1989.

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As the Workforce 2000 data shows, cultural diversity is and will be the rule rather than the exception in the American workforce. Cross-cultural communication is a natural requirement of the changing workforce demographics which the data describes. Cross-cultural communication provides some of the fundamental skills and building blocks upon which valuing and managing diversity rests.

Our time together is too short to have an in-depth discussion of cross-cultural communication in the workplace so I will to confine my remarks to 3 topics: a very brief description of what cross-cultural communication is; why we can't stay home without it or why cross-cultural communication is essential for the present and future workforce and finally how one learns to communicate across cultures.

WHAT IS CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION?

Cross-cultural/intercultural/multicultural communication is a tool which helps you to effectively work and interact with people of different cultures. As such it is not a set of skills for one group of people to have in order to work with another group, but rather skills necessary for all people who work together in a multicultural environment. The central principle of cross-cultural communication theory is that everything you do and everything you perceive is filtered through your cultural knowledge. You use this cultural knowledge in every situation. You know when it is safe to cross the street because of this knowledge. You can guess when someone from your culture is lying or know what is expected of you because of this knowledge. This is very effective when you live or work where the culture is homogenous since it allows you to operate smoothly and predictably. You know what to expect and how to behave in any given situation. Unfortunately it causes problems when you interact with a group is made up of people from heterogeneous cultures. Misunderstanding, hurt feelings and general ill will usually result when one culture's knowledge is used as the base for interacting with staff, employees, clients or customers from other, different cultures. You may find that just because the parking lot is painted to indicate appropriate parking spaces doesn't mean that someone won't park on the grass or that some of the foreign members of your staff seems dishonest because they will not look you in the eye. Cross-cultural communication is an integrated package of knowledge, skill, ability and attitude which helps you find out and understand things like this. It provides a way to know what to expect and how to interact when you live or work with people from other cultures. (In this case, other cultures here can mean one which comes from half way around the world or halfway down the street.)

WHY DO WE NEED CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN THE WORKPLACE?

The reason cross-cultural communication is essential in the workplace is the same reason it is necessary to make any good business decision - dollars and cents. The demographics tell us that the new jobseekers will come from many different cultures. In Washington, D. C.and other areas of the U.S., it is now and will continue to be in the future a jobseekers market. Any potential employee (given the choice) will want to work where she or he feels the most comfortable and the most valued. The employers with the best reputation for providing this kind of environment will get the best applicants. Employers who don't will not only have limited access to the pool of jobseekers but will also start to lose their most skilled culturally different employees because they too will go where they feel respected and appreciated. It is easy to find cost quotation for lost revenue when a employee quits unexpectedly or when an important position remains vacant. Cross-cultural communication is the initial step to prevent having this lose/lose situation occur.

I would like to illustrate with some examples of real life situations in which some skill and knowledge about another culture would have saved the day. Please understand that I have no intention of laying responsibility or blame for these situations with either party. They are simply very typical of what happens when people who are reacting very rationally within their own cultural frameworks try to transfer that knowledge into interactions with people from other cultures.

1. An older Vietnamese man worked at a local electronics company. His name (Huynh Van Trung) was difficult for his American supervisor to pronounce. The supervisor's solution to the difficulty was to not address Mr. Trung unless it was absolutely necessary. At those times he would call "Hey guy" and gesture to get his attention. After about 2 weeks, Mr. Trung, the Vietnamese employee, quit without an explanation. The supervisor was rather upset because Mr. Trung had been a good employee - very hard working and accurate. The supervisor felt very aggrieved because he thought that the employee's abrupt departure was unappreciative given the risk he had taken in hiring someone who didn't speak very good English and the time and attention he had taken in training him. Also the it would require valuable time and expense to hire a new employee. He guessed that the employee had quit to take a better paying job and left so abruptly because the new employer wanted him to start immediately. In fact, Mr. Trung did not have another job. He quit because he felt he had been treated extremely disrespectfully. He hadn't understood what the supervisor meant when he said Hey guy so he looked up guy in his dictionary. Vietnamese culture and

language have a highly structured way of addressing different people based on your status in relationship to them. According to Mr. Trung's cultural and linguistic interpretation, he had been addressed in what was equivalent to "Hey boy" to an American black male. Additionally this gesture is one which is only used with small children and animals in Vietnam.

2. The supervisor of a multicultural staff was having trouble making a decision about one of his employees from Afghanistan. The employee was very knowledgeable about the company product and the supervisor knew from conversations with him that he wanted to be promoted to salesman. However, the supervisor wasn't sure the employee had enough initiative to go out and really sell the product. He felt this way because each time a situation arose which was even a little different from any other, when any kind of a decision was called for, when any conflict with the other staff members arose, the employee would always ask the supervisor what he should do. The supervisor felt that if he couldn't do these things within the office he would never be able to do them outside.

The employee from his point of view felt that he just had an inept supervisor. A good supervisor would not tell his staff to use their own judgement or deal with problems on their own. This is shirking his responsibilities. It is a supervisor's duty and prerogative to direct all work activities, make all decisions and control the activities of his staff. For an employee to try and do these things would be presumptuous, impolite, disrespectful and would probably lead to dismissal.

3.At an all staff meeting, a Cambodian employee was unexpectedly honored for having the best performance record for the quarter. The staff people making the award said at the beginning of the meeting that they wanted to make a special announcement. They then said they wanted to recognize this staff person for the best quarterly performance, unfurled a large banner saying Congratulation and her name and held up a wrapped gift. After a few seconds and some encouragement from her coworkers, the employee walked to the front of the room, accepted the gift, said thank you and sat down. Upon further encouragement, she unwrapped her gift and placed it on the table.

Although it was not obvious to her coworkers, the whole process made the employee very uncomfortable. Initially she was uncomfortable because in her culture people are not usually singled out of a group for praise or punishment. Cambodians are very modest people. To be publicly acknowledged causes internal conflict because receiving public attention is perceived as being the result of or resulting in prideful behavior. To stand up in front of a group and say thank you seemed immodest because acknowledging the praise or even

attracting public attentions seems like bragging or boasting. She was also uncomfortable about opening the gift in front of the gift giver which is bad mannered in many Southeast Asian cultures.

All of these examples really happened. They are not rare.

WHERE DO YOU LEARN TO COMMUNICATE CROSS-CULTURALLY?

Cross-cultural communication is a skill and can be learned like any other. However it is a skill that is learned as an ongoing process. You can't have 2 hours of cross-cultural training on Friday afternoon and expect results. Any learning in which the learner must examine and explore deeply and often unconsciously held assumptions, beliefs and values takes place over time. Advances in knowledge and skill are accretionary and challenging. Therefore, cross-cultural training is training that requires a strong long term commitment on the part of the employer.

Unlike many other types of skills training, cross-cultural training requires a trainer who is highly skilled and experienced in doing this specific kind of training. They must be have an in-depth understanding of their own cultural beliefs, values and assumption, a vast amount of knowledge about the effects of culture and cultural differences and experience working in the sometimes emotionally charged atmosphere out of which cross-cultural communication skills emerge. You can not simply hand the package to your training department on Friday and say "Can you do this on Monday?"

So where do you get these Super Trainers and how do you evaluate what they have to offer? There are several options. One is to have your in-house training department develop the expertise to do this work. The other is to hire an outside consultant. We will talk about the benefits and drawbacks of each of these and then go on to how can evaluate the training the is offered.

The benefits of an in-house cross-cultural trainer are that you have someone who intimately knows your needs and your population, who can plan and implement a full range of training as it is needed and address any special needs. The person can also serve as an in-house consultant for specific problems as well as providing the general cross-cultural training. One of the drawbacks of having an in-house cross-cultural trainer is the initial time and cost for training the person and allowing them to develop some expertise in the field. Additionally, you must be very careful in selecting the person who will be your trainer. Not everyone is suited to be a cross-cultural trainer. Some of the attributes of a good potential cross-cultural trainer are: respect for other

cultures, flexibility, tolerance of ambiguity, nonjudgementalness, empathy, self-awareness, persistence and excellent communication. However, once you have made your selection and the person is trained they are always there to meet your specific needs to design and provide very specific follow-up. There are several sources for training in cross-cultural communication. Some universities like American University offer advanced degrees in intercultural communication, the Society for Intercultural Education, Training and Research, a professional organization for interculturalists offers training programs and a yearly international conference. The Summer Institute for Intercultural Communication is also an excellent source of professional education.

Another option is to hire a consultant who will for a fee come in and provide training for you. In Washington, D.C. and other large cities there are usually many companies which can provide cross-cultural training programs. Some of them only do cross-cultural training but others offer it as one option in a range of other employee development and management training. It is very important if you do use a consultant that you evaluate what they have to offer carefully to make sure that what they propose meets your needs. Ask for a demonstration and checkable references before you contract with them. Check on the references. After selecting a trainer, pay close attention to how they go about developing the training especially if you have requested it as the result of a specific situation. A good company will do a needs assessment to see what your situation is, what your strengths are and to determine what you need. Although some of the actual training program may be "canned" most should be specifically designed for your situation. Follow-up training recommendations should be part of the package. In Washington there are many excellent smaller companies. The Society for Intercultural Education, Training and Research is also a good resource for referrals to trainers.

A third option is one like that offered by Copeland Griggs, a company which has produced a 3 part series of video tapes on various aspects of cross-cultural communication and managing diversity. The tapes are accompanied by a trainers manual and a training of trainers program is available as well.

Although these descriptions have been brief, you can see how a company can begin to develop competency in cross-cultural communication.

In the past, the expectation and at least the surface reality was that cultural minorities had to adjust and adapt to the dominant cultural pattern - largely white, middle class and male. However, in the future there will be no dominant group

except women. Continued productivity will demand that we forge a new pattern acceptable to all. Cross-cultural communication as an integrated package of knowledge, skill, ability and attitude is part of what ill enable us to do this. It provides the tools to know what to expect and how to interact when you live or work with people from other cultures. It provides the foundation for managing and valuing the diverse workforce we are becoming.